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The everyday in “The Closing Down of Summer” by Alistair McLeod

Laurent Lepaludier

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven”(Ecclesiastes, III, 1)

1 Studying the theme and poetics of the everyday in Alistair MacLeod’s stories is particularly appropriate because they are often set in the Cape Breton area in Nova Scotia and describe the life of its inhabitants. As Elizabeth Lowry points out, Alistair MacLeod is “an astute observer of a very specific local setting (...); of its landscape and industry, its closed communities, quotidian tragedies and domestic disappointments.”[1] The everyday is usually connected with the idea of stability in terms of setting –the home, the workplace or the usual haunts. A familiar setting may find a corresponding structure in time –the repetitive and iterative modes expressed in semantic, verbal, adverbial or adjectival ways. In drawing a picture of how a group of Canadian miners spend their holidays in their native place on the west coast of Cape Breton, “The Closing Down of Summer” highlights unchanging traditions and portrays social habits. Yet this short story conveys a sense of change, notably through its title which suggests a passage to another season. A study of the poetics of the quotidian and of its significance is bound to tackle the question of the representation of time but also the theme of the changeable and the unchangeable, the particular and the universal, to try and interpret the philosophical, symbolic or aesthetic implications of the story. The narrative constructs the everyday of a community as dual, as this essay will first show. If duality suggests potential changes, it is confirmed by a paradoxical impression that the quotidian works as a form of transience rather than one of stability. Whether the everyday can be transcended is the last question addressed in this study.

Constructing the everyday

2 The quotidian is obviously a matter of time. In this story, what occurs every day or just about every day is not mainly expressed in the preterite - only a section is - but in the

present tense. The use of the present strikes the reader because it is unusual in narratives and because it is regularly used throughout the story: "Here on this beach, on Cape Breton's west coast, there are no tourists." (7)[2] This statement presenting a fact –the specific assertive value of the present tense- also suggests in the context an unchanging characteristic of the place which seems to be taken from a documentary – the generic value of the present tense establishing a characteristic or a usual fact[3]. Other statements describe the scenery and the miners' attitude in the present tense too, bringing together an unchangeable setting and an attitude shown as a regular and unchanging habit: "The golden little beach upon which we lie curves in a crescent for approximately three-quarters of a mile and then terminates at either end in looming cliffs." (8) Also close to a present of description in the following instance, the telling of habits is expressed through iterative forms enhancing the recurrence of events:

> At the south cliff a little brook ends its journey and plummets almost vertically some fifty feet into the sea. Sometimes after our swims or after lying too long in the sand we stand underneath its fall as we would a shower, feeling the fresh water fall upon our heads and necks and shoulders and running down our bodies' lengths to our feet which stand within the sea. (9)

3 Different aspects of the present tense can also be found in consecutive sentences with the same blurring effect: indeed one is tempted not to make a difference between the descriptive assertion, the general characteristic and the daily routine of holidays:

> Beside us on the beach lie [descriptive] the white Javex containers filled with alcohol. It is the purest of moonshine made by our relatives back in the hills and is impossible to buy [general]. It comes to us [habit] only as a gift or in exchange for long past favours (...) It is as clear as water [descriptive], and a teaspoonful of it when touched by a match will burn with the low blue flame of a votive candle until it is completely consumed, leaving the teaspoon hot and totally dry. (10)

4 It is noteworthy as well that the modal "will" is here used to depict a present habit and not the future.

5 The use of the present tense does not correspond to the creation of a background to a singular event. In fact, it is sustained - apart from the section in the preterite - and together with the present perfect, shapes the structure of the story. Indeed, one can find it on page 12 ("Out on the flatness of the sea we can see the fishermen going about their work"), 17 ("In my own white house my wife does her declining wash among an increasingly bewildering battery of appliances."), 27 ("I must not think too much of death and loss, I tell myself repeatedly."), and in the very last pages. The iterative meaning of the present tense is often highlighted by adverbs of frequency or phrases such as "unaccountable times" (9). The story does not have a singulative value: it is meant to convey a sense of the usual, to depict the daily life of these miners on holiday. No singular event occurs to disturb the regular order of things.

6 The description of the setting also shapes the everyday, creating familiar landscapes or seascapes. Actually the quotidian is not that of the home with its domestic activities – the women's everyday in the story. It is that of the men's haunts outside. The beach, the brooks with their trout, the gardens, what they hear about tourists, highways, cars, motels and lobster traps are part of the men's daily life. The plural, often used, also contributes to the evocation of recurrent activities seen in their multiple and iterative aspects. Besides, taking showers under a fall displaces the domestic into outside natural surroundings. The "quiet graveyards that lie inland" are also their concern because the miners are the ones who take the dead back home.

7 The narrative voice which constructs familiar time and setting is first identified as collective. Six pages have to be read before finding the first person of the singular “I”. The first person of the plural controls the narration almost from the very beginning: “We have been here for most of the summer.” (7-8) Its use continues consistently over the next pages, alternating with the singular in most personal episodes until the very end. Even though the singular has an importance, it essentially illustrates the plural: what concerns the narrator - the loss of his brother, memories about his father, remarks about his wife - is typical, usual. It also appears that the narrator is the miners’ authority, not an authoritarian leader at all, but someone who discreetly signals what the collective spirit has already decided, as the conditions of their departure show at the end of the short story. Obviously his function is essentially collective. His words “strike the note for (...) the translation of personal experience into motifs which have a collective significance.”[4] His voice is thus much more the voice of a community of men than that of an individual, which contributes very much to the originality of the narrative, particularly in an enunciation that sounds both immediate and timeless because of its general value[5].

8 The collective self present in the narration reflects upon itself and the everyday of a community treated as a whole. If individual bodies are a matter of concern, it is because of their collective value, for they are “our bodies” (9). The narrative depicts them as though they were not separate: “We have arms that cannot raise above our heads” (9). Numbers matter more than individuals (“many of us”, “few of us”). Singularity has been lost to the collective being of the community, which further enhances the importance of routines. The everyday defines the community.

9 The everyday in Cape Breton functions as a point of reference for another sort of daily life, away from home, the daily round of mining work. General remarks such as “we are perhaps the best crew of shaft and development miners in the world” (8) or “our crew is known as McKinnon” (26) evoke the mining trade. Occasionally - but seldom - is mining an object of iterative description in the present (“when we work we are often twelve hours in the shaft’s bottom or in the development drifts and we do not often feel the sun.” (9). It is the mining work that holds the community of men together in its daily round. The presence of everyday work also transpires in the sentence “we are all still in good shape after a summer of idleness” (8) The miners’ bodies bear the marks of the other - and more lasting - quotidian: the skin, the hair, the scars, the limbs testify to this other daily activity:

> Bodies that when free of mud and grime and the singed-hair smell of blasting powder are white almost to the colour of milk or ivory. Perhaps of leprosy. (...) Only the scars that all of us bear fail to respond to the healing power of the sun’s heat.(...) Many of us carry one shoulder permanently lower than the other where we have been hit by rockfalls or the lop of the giant clam that swings down upon us in the narrow closeness of the shaft’s bottom. And we have arms that we cannot raise above our heads and touches of arthritis in our backs and in our shoulders, magnified by the water that chills and falls upon us in our work. Few of us have all our fingers and some have lost either eyes or ears from falling tools or discharged blasting caps or flying stone or splintering timbers. (9)

10 Bodies bridge the gap between the miners’ two lives: “We are always intensely aware of our bodies” (10). The other link is memory, which functions in connection with bodies: “Lying now upon the beach we see the external scars on ourselves and on each other and

are stirred to the memories of how they occurred." (10) The permanence of the marks of the daily routine of work impinges upon that of the summer holidays.

11 The miners' life at work surges when brought into contrast with the domestic routine of the narrator's wife:

> Her kitchen and her laundry room and her entire house gleam with porcelain and enamel and an ordered cleanliness that I can no longer comprehend. Little about me or about my work is clean or orderly and I am always mildly amazed to find the earnings of the violence and dirt in which I make my living converted into such meticulous brightness (...) For us most of our working lives are spent in rough, crude bunk-houses thrown up at the shaft-head's site. Our bunks are made of two-by-fours (...) Such rooms are like hospital wards (...). (17)

12 His working life is also contrasted with that of his children and comes in the form of a wish:

> I have always wished that my children could see me at work. That they might journey down with me in the dripping cage to the shaft's bottom or walk the eerie tunnels of the drifts that end in walls of staring stone. And that they might see how articulate we are in the accomplishment of what we do. (23)

13 Everyday work also permeates life at home, as the episode of the narrator's father's coffin falling down upon the bearers recalls the dangers of mining. The irony of the choice of such a trade does not escape the narrator's notice: "I was aware even then of the ultimate irony of my choice." He dropped out of the university because he wanted to "burst out", "to feel that I was breaking free" and chose precisely to "spend his working days in the most confined of places" (25).

14 If the miners' everyday life is dual, that of their families bears the mark of permanence. The adverb "permanently" typifies the life of the narrator's wife: "Now my wife seems to have gone permanently into a world of avocado appliances and household cleanliness and vicarious experiences provided by the interminable soap operas that fill her television afternoons." (18) The miners are estranged from the daily round of their families' activities. Their sons will live completely differently from them. The wives' and the sons' everyday, characterised by permanence and security, function as foils to the miners' dual and seasonal quotidian with its risky aspect. Indeed, in constructing the miners' everyday, the narrative conveys the transience of the quotidian.

The transience of the everyday

15 Time seems to be hinging on the present moment. The title of the short story evokes an end suggesting the closing down of a shop, a factory, a club or the termination of an activity. A sense of impermanence is conveyed by the use of the progressive form as in "We are lying now in the ember of summer's heat and in the stillness of its time."(12) The instantaneous and temporary value[6] is reinforced by the temporal deictic "now" and the image of the ember expressing the end of summer. The present moment is felt as protracted and precarious. The present tense can also intimate the provisional character of the everyday:

> The sun no longer shines with the fierceness of the earlier day (...) Evening is approaching. The sand is whipped by the wind (...) We flinch and shake ourselves and reach for our protective shirts (...) In the sand we trace erratic designs and patterns with impatient toes. (27)

16 Transience also connotes the perspective on the quotidian implied in the use of the present perfect. If it brings together past and present[7] it also defines a time-bound and short-lived period: "All summer it has been very hot. So hot that the gardens have died and the hay has not grown and the surface wells have dried to dampened mud. The brooks that flow to the sea have dried to trickles." (7) This feeling of the passing of time, on being on the edge is sustained throughout the story with a very consistent use of the present perfect together with the present. This is reinforced by adverbs denoting mutability such as "still", "not yet", "as yet", etc.

17 The ephemeral nature of the everyday is thematically illustrated by the seasonal quality of the period described. The characteristics of the end of summer suggest the round of the seasons, creating a sense of expectancy even at the very beginning of the story: "We have been here for most of the summer. Surprised at the endurance and consistency of the heat. Waiting for it to break and perhaps to change the spell."(7-8). The slight changes in the weather signal the end of the holidays. The narration underlines the transitory character of the period: "Still we know that the weather cannot last much longer and in another week the tourists will be gone and the school will reopen and the pace of life will change."(8) Implied in the seasonal inscription of time is the cyclical nature of the everyday. There is indeed a time for everything, a time for work and a time for idleness - which is coming to an end. The miners' bodies themselves bear the mark of a long summer approaching its end as recalled by the permanence of the scars:

> All summer we have watched our bodies change their colour and seen our hair grow bleached and ever lighter. Only the scars that all of us bear fail to respond to the healing power of the sun's heat. They seem to stand out even more vividly now, long running pink welts that course down our inner forearms or jagged saw-tooth ridges on the taut calves of our legs. (9)

18 The theme of transience seeps into the very description of the landscape with verbs suspiciously redolent of the end as in " The golden little beach (...) terminates at either end in looming cliffs." (8) Or again in "At the south cliff a little brook ends its journey" (9).

19 The quotidian holiday routine is beset by foreshadowing and memories of the other everyday, that of mining. The scars on the miners' bodies remind them of accidents: "memories of how they occurred" (10). Remembrances are conjured up in the form of analepses, either singulative - i.e. referring to one event - or iterative - i.e. referring to an habitual one (with the use of "would" and adverbs of frequency as in page 13). They bring the quotidian past of work into the present. But what awaits them in the near future is anticipated. It is sometimes implied in the use of the present tense characterising the miners' life, sometimes announced by the modal "will" as is their future employment in Africa: "In Africa it will be hot too, in spite of the coming rainy season, and on the veldt the heat will shimmer and the strange, fine-limbed animals will move across it in patterns older than memory."(16) The determinant "the" implies knowledge of a place familiar to the narrator. Because "will" sometimes announces the future and sometimes characterises the miners' activities, the gap between present and future tends to be reduced, suggesting the invasion of daily work into an idle everyday.

20 The everyday is fraught with intimations of death, past and future. Memories of death, the ultimate passage, surge from the familiar setting itself: "In the quiet graveyards that lie inland the dead are buried. Behind the small white wooden churches and beneath the monuments of polished black granite they take their silent rest." (12) The lexical field of

death conjures up immediately the death of fellow miners: “Death in the shafts and in the drifts is always violent and very often the body is crushed or so blown apart that it cannot be reassembled properly for exposure in the coffin.” (13) Then through analepses, the narrator recalls the deaths of miners in Ontario’s Elliot Lake and Bancroft uranium shafts “some twenty years ago.”(13) There follows another flashback to the time when the narrator’s younger brother died in Newfoundland “fifteen years ago.”(14) The memory expands over two pages.

21 Such memories together with the unchanging everyday life of his wife remind the narrator of the fleeting nature of time: “It is difficult to explain to my wife such things and we have grown more and more apart with the passage of years.” (17) The estrangement from his children encourages the same feeling:

> (...) And of how I lie awake at night aware of my own decline and of the diminishing of the men around me. For all of us know we will not last much longer and that it is unlikely that we will be replaced in the shaft’s bottom by members of our own flesh and bone. (22)

22 The discrepancy between the songs his family sing and those he knows inevitably evokes death:

> There was always a feeling of mild panic on hearing whole dance floors of people singing aloud songs that had come and flourished since my departure and which I had never heard. As if I had been on a journey to the land of the dead. (19)

23 Even the Celtic revival, which should have brought together the older and the younger generation, is “a revival that is very different from our own” (20) and the narrator feels closer to the Zulus than to his own sons. A sense of an oncoming death permeates the narrator’s comments: “I would like to tell my wife and children something of the way my years pass by on the route to my inevitable death.” (22) In a comparison, he pictures himself as “a gladiator who fights away the impassiveness of water as it drips on darkened stone.”(22) So it is not simply the idle quotidian of holidays that is at stake but his life. The narrator cannot help facing death in his risky work - and in the narrative itself:

> I must not think too much of death and loss, I tell myself repeatedly. For if I am to survive I must be as careful and calculating with my thoughts as I am with my tools when working so far beneath the earth’s surface. I must always be careful of sloppiness and self-indulgence lest they cost me dearly in the end. (27)

24 In that context, the change in the weather takes on a symbolic dimension. The waves breaking upon the beach, the wind in their faces and the approaching evening lead to questions expressed as direct thought ambiguously evoking change and death: “Perhaps this is what we have been waiting for? Perhaps this is the end and the beginning?”(27) The wind and the men’s sigh are actually compared further on: “There is a collective sigh that is more sensed than really heard. Almost like distant wind in far-off trees.”(28). The waves stand as a symbol of death in the miners’ eyes as they destroy the shapes of their bodies in the sand:

> The waves are higher now and are breaking and cresting and rolling farther in. They have obliterated the outlines of our bodies in the sand and our footprints of brief moments before already have been washed away. There remains no evidence of what we have ever been. It is as if we have never lain, nor ever walked nor ever thought what thoughts we had. We leave no art or mark behind. The sea has washed its sand slate clean. (28)

25 If the signs of death are sometimes implicit in the obliteration of the outlines of the bodies and of the footprints, they are explicitly commented upon.

26 The visit to the churchyards, the farewells and the journey to Toronto in the cars take on a symbolic dimension. The miners, numbed with moonshine, undertake a night journey to the land of the dead, ready to face their doom and the narrator feels “like a figure in some mediaeval ballad who has completed his formal farewells and goes now to meet his fatalistic future.”(30) The fifteenth century Gaelic song which surges like a “towering, breaking wave”(31) illustrates the theme of the journey towards death:

> I wend to death, knight stith in stour;
> Through fight in field I won the flower;
> No fights me taught the death to quell-
> I wend to death, sooth I you tell
> I wend to death, a king iwis;
> What helpes honour or worlde’s bliss?
> Death is to man the final way-
> I wende to be clad in clay.(31)

The dirge which concludes the short story echoes in the reader’s ears and comments upon the symbolic value of the title: the closing down of summer might be permanent and not just seasonal. The miners’ everyday is never seen as trivial for it is endowed with a transcendent dimension.

Transcending the everyday

27 A miner’s life is not devoid of a confrontation with the customary. It might be a harsh life with its “twelve-hour stand-up shifts” (10) or the rudimentary housing conditions - the “rough bunkhouses”(17) - or the triteness of community living with its “snoring and coughing or spitting into cans”(17). The narrator even confesses it might lack originality: “Perhaps we are becoming our previous generation?”(18) Yet the everyday is transcended by work. Expressing his wish that his children could see him at work, the narrator celebrates the miners’ achievements as with a litany, repeating the same structural pattern at the beginning of each sentence:

> That they might journey down with me in the dripping cage to the shaft’s bottom or walk the eerie tunnels of the drifts that end in walls of staring stone. And that they might see how articulate we are in the accomplishment of what we do. That they might appreciate the perfection of our drilling and the calculations of our angles and the measuring of our powder, and that they might understand that what we know through eye and ear and touch is of a finer quality than any information garnered by the most sophisticated of mining engineers with all their elaborate equipment. (23-4)

28 The isotopy of scientific precision illustrates and corroborates that of perfection. Work is indeed magnified. The “joy of breaking through” and the pride of “liberating resources” enhance the “glamour” of professionals living a nomadic life that “sedentary” people cannot understand. The miners’ work attains an aesthetic perfection that transcends the quotidian. The isotopy of perfection is here connected with that of beauty:

> (...) there is perhaps a certain eloquent beauty to be found in what we do. (...) It is perhaps akin to the violent motion of the huge professional athletes on the given days or nights of their many games. Men as huge and physical as we are; polished and eloquent in the propelling of their bodies towards their desired goals and in their relationships and dependencies on one another but often numb and silent before the microphone of their sedentary interviewers. (24)

29 The movements of the bodies transcend the utilitarian to reach an elaborate rhetoric needing sophisticated interpreters. Ironically, only the miners themselves seem to be in a capacity to appreciate their own performance in dark and enclosed tunnels. The modalising adverb "perhaps" -used twice - barely contains the temptation of grandiloquence. For work magnifies the MacKinnons and endows them with the qualities of mythic heroes.

30 The narration verges on myth-making, defamiliarising the MacKinnons' quotidian working life and giving it a magnified status. They form a sort of tribe of nomads, only comparable perhaps to this other tribe of fishermen with whom they exchange favours. In the tribe each individual finds his purpose in the collective being. The personal pronoun "we" gathers and defines the community of miners. The narrator certainly feels closer to the Zulus than to his own family. He takes interest in the nomads of Africa. He is attentive to their bodies, their shouts and their eyes and reads their feelings in their dance. The bond between tribal men is implied in the sentence: "Hoping to find there a message that is recognisable only to primitive men."(20) Their bodies "magnified" (9) by the work and full of scars resemble the bodies of warriors. Their status is given epic proportions. Their working clothes make them "loom even larger than we are in actual life" (29). As primitive men, the MacKinnons form a tribe of warriors like their Scottish ancestors on the "battlefield of the world"(11), fighting "adversary" walls (25). They have their own rules and seem to be above the laws applying to ordinary citizens, speeding and drinking moonshine, "seldom fined or in odd instances allowed to pay our speeding fines upon the spot."(11) Adventurers and treasure-hunters, they can be found in Haiti, in Chile, in the Congo, in Bolivia, in Guatemala, in Mexico, in Jamaica or in South-Africa - the enumeration magnifies their importance. The narrator compares himself to "a gladiator who fights always the impassiveness of water" (22). He also feels like a figure in a medieval ballad "who goes to meet his fatalistic future" (30). In fact, the miners belong to a timeless, hence mythical world for they also feel "As if we are Greek actors or mastodons of an earlier time. Soon to be replaced or else perhaps extinct."(29). The significance of their lives must be appreciated in relation with the Ancient times, the Middle Ages or the timelessness of tribal consciousness. The phone calls announcing the deaths of miners lose their specificity in time. The comparison with the ballads and folktales underlines their unchanging truth and testifies to their timelessness:

> The darkness of the midnight phone call seems somehow to fade with the passing of time, or to change and be recreated like the ballads and folktales of the distant lonely past. Changing with each new telling as the tellers of the tales change, as they become different, older, more bitter or more serene. It is possible to hear descriptions of phone calls that you yourself have made some ten or fifteen years ago and to recognize very little about them except the undeniable kernel of truth that was at the centre of the messages they contained. (14-5)

31 The notion of telling as recreation participates in the mythical conception of time and rituals. The miners' working life seems to unroll in archaic time, free from the bonds of change or progress, or from the tyranny of the fleeting moment. Yet "The Closing Down of Summer" conveys the sense of a coming end. To exorcise the fleeting of time and share in the world of myth, the miners perform rituals of many kinds.

32 Drinking is treated as a community ritual, a sort of bond connecting the miners with their families back in the hills or with the fishermen who act out "their ancient rituals" (12) and with whom they trade alcohol for fish. Moonshine cannot be bought and, because of its symbolic value in the eyes of the community, it is essentially a sign of social

belonging, part and parcel of the rituals of barter and mourning: "It comes to us as a gift or in exchange for long-past favours: bringing home of bodies, small loans of forgotten dollars, kindnesses to now-dead grandmothers."(10) It burns with the purity and religious significance of "a votive candle" (10). The miners also carry it along with them in their cars on their way to Toronto as they leave, as a sort of viaticum or part of a rite of passage since the departure takes on a dimension of death. The postcards sent home, although they only "talk about the weather continents and oceans away" (21-2) participate in the ritual of exchange with the younger children: "postcards that have as their most exciting feature the exotic postage stamps sought after by the younger children for games of show and tell."(22).

33 The MacKinnons perform their "rituals of farewell" (29) at the end of their holidays. These rituals have the power to transform everyday life, to give it a holy dimension because they imply a belief in the invisible. Visiting the banks, checking out the dates on the insurance policies, gathering the working clothes, but also visiting the churches or standing by the graves constitute the different steps of a rite of passage which reveals the spiritual nature of the everyday. Indeed the narrator realises that "we have become strangely religious in ways that border close on superstition."(29) The various objects - Christian or pagan symbols - taken along keep the miners close to their ancestors and their past in a timeless and archaic dimension:

> We will take with us worn family rosaries and faded charms and loop ancestral medals and crosses of delicate worn fragility around our scar-lashed necks and about the thickness of our wrists, seemingly unaware of whatever irony they might project. This too seems but a further longing for the past, far removed from the "rational" approaches to religion that we sometimes encounter in our children. (29)

34 These sacred objects keep the miners in touch with their homeland and families in spite of the distances and differences. This is also true of the sprigs of spruce trees "wedged within the grillework of our cars or stuck beneath the headlight bulbs". (11) The sprigs bring together the everyday of summertime and the ordinary working days. What is collected by chance is deliberately given significance, made sacred and ritualised: "We will remove them and take them with us to Africa as mementoes or talismans or symbols of identity."(11) The rather unspecified value attached to the sprigs brings together the roots, the sacred, the homeland and the identity of the community. The significance of the quotidian must be found in this connection. This is expanded in a comparison with their ancestors:

> Much as our Highland ancestors, for centuries, fashioned crude badges of heather or of whortleberries to accompany them on the battlefields of the world. Perhaps so that in the closeness of their work with death they might find nearness to their homes and an intensified realization of themselves.(11)

35 The meaning of life is inseparable from death, expressed in the many rituals of death evoked or remembered in this short story.

36 Visits to churchyards, wakes, "youthful photographs" (13) or the yellow telegram "kept in vases and in Bibles and in dresser-drawers beneath white shirts", "[A] simple obituary of a formal kind"(15) both recall and exorcise death. Mourning joins in with a cult of the dead and of the ancestors. Memories of burials, such as that of the narrator's younger brother, link up with the conditions and dangers of mining in a compelling manner. The collapse of the grave, with the sliding earth and cracking wood, evokes the brother's death and a miner's typical professional risks:

> The next day at his funeral the rain continued to fall and in the grave that received him the unsteady timbers and the ground they held so temporarily back seemed but an extension of those that had caused his life to cease. (16)

37 It is in those rites of death that the everyday routine finds its profound significance as a struggle against death and the proud continuation of community traditions.

38 Daily life is also transcended through Gaelic music and folktales. Gaelic songs constitute a link with the past. The miners remember them from their early youth; they sing them on the beach, on their journey and at work. They differ from the songs of the modern hit-parades in that they are "so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar."(19) Their presence in their childhood and youth and their continuity in mature age certainly accounts for their familiarity. The Gaelic language of their Scottish forebears had been instilled into them but came up in the isolation of the shafts:

> As if it had sunk in unconsciously through some osmotic process while I had been unwittingly growing up. Growing up without fully realizing the language of the conversations that swirled around me. Now in the shafts and on the beach we speak it almost constantly though it is no longer spoken in our homes. (19)

39 The "ballads and folktales of the distant lonely past" (14) come up as a point of comparison to account for the meaning of phone calls. Traditional music, when the bagpipe-player plays "Flowers of the Forest" causes "the hair to bristle on the backs of our necks" (14) awakening a sense of social identity and prompting people to speak the Gaelic language in outbursts of mourning farewells. Contrary to an artificial summer-culture "Celtic Revival", the MacKinnons experience a descent into their remote past, the depths of their archaic nature and community spirit: "Singing songs in an archaic language as we too became more archaic and recognising the nods of acknowledgement and shouted responses as coming only from our friends and relatives." Although the songs are "for the most part local and private" and would lose "almost all of substance in translation", they reach for the universal as the narrator hopes, referring to a quotation from his daughter's university textbook. It is because the archaic or mythical constitutes the universal foundation of the particular, the local or the private. The Gaelic songs and folktales revive the past and the present in a timeless mythic transformation. In singing in Gaelic, the men's quasi-unconscious incantation reaches the depths of the collective unconscious in which they experience a sense of the familiar: "After a while they begin to sing in Gaelic, singing almost unconsciously the old words that are so worn and so familiar."(30) Time is thus ritually abolished and the everyday acquires another dimension since it shares in the traditional expression of a community. The quotidian mining work and the singing in Gaelic are but two ways of using traditional tools: "They seem to handle them [the old words] almost as they would familiar tools."(30)

40 In the fifteenth-century Gaelic song which concludes the short story, life –and the everyday- is seen as a journey towards death: "I wend to death". In the perspective of the short story, it is the miners' everyday which is endowed with epic overtones: "*knight stith in stour/Through fight in field I won the flower/ No fights me taught the death to quell*". The alliteration in [kl] in "*clad in clay*" draws attention on the final word "*clay*" as both the symbol of death and the familiar element of mining work, the word combining the metaphysical and the everyday.

41 It is the Cape Breton miners' quotidian life of labour, which haunts the whole story. The miners' summer-time everyday only finds significance in relation to it. It shows the transience of life which can be transcended by everyday work itself, by myth-making and

rituals. The purpose of the narrative is not simply to construct the everyday. It aims at giving a voice to often felt but unexpressed feelings of identity. Miners do not speak directly in this short story. Yet through an essentially collective voice (“we”) mixed with a discreet personal one, with recourse to the experience of a community, their rituals, gestures, traditions, myths, songs or language, the narrative recreates folk culture – as “the ballads and the folktales of the lonely distant past”(14) would, not reproducing bygone legends but seeing the archaic in the contemporary. Thus Alistair MacLeod participates in what John Barth called “the literature of replenishment”.

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NOTES

1. . Elizabeth Lowry, “Little Red Boy”, a review of MacLeod’s *Island: Collected Stories* and *No Great Mischief*, *The London Review of Books*, 20 September 2001, 21.
2. . All references to “The Closing Down of Summer” are taken *from As Birds Bring Forth the Sun & Other Stories*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, (1986), 1992, 7-31 and are given parenthetically in the text.
3. . These notions are taken from Jean-Rémi Lapaire & Wilfrid Rotgé, *Linguistique et grammaire de l’anglais*, Toulouse : Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1991, 393-404.
4. . Elizabeth Lowry, *ibid*.
5. . See Randolph Quirk & Sidney Greenbaum, *A University Grammar of English*, Harlow: Longman, 1973, 41
6. . Randolph Quirk & Sidney Greenbaum, *op. cit*., 41.
7. . See Jean-Rémi Lapaire & Wilfrid Rotgé, *op. cit.,* 457.

ABSTRACTS

Le quotidien évoque généralement l’idée de stabilité en termes de spatialité : la maison, le lieu de travail ou les lieux habituellement fréquentés. A un environnement familier peut correspondre une structure temporelle : modes répétitifs et itératifs exprimés sous forme sémantique, verbale, adverbiale ou adjectivale. Par la peinture de la vie d’un groupe de mineurs canadiens en vacances sur la côte ouest du Cap Breton, leur région d’origine, « The Closing Down of Summer » met en scène des traditions immuables et décrit des habitudes sociales. Cependant cette nouvelle communique aussi une sensation de changement, en particulier par son titre, qui suggère le passage à une autre saison. Une étude de la poétique du quotidien et de sa signification se doit de traiter la question de la représentation du temps, mais aussi les thèmes du changement et de la permanence, du particulier et de l’universel, afin d’interpréter les implications philosophiques, symboliques ou esthétiques de la nouvelle. La narration construit le quotidien d’une communauté comme double, comme le montre d’abord cet essai. Si la dualité suggère des changements potentiels, cette impression est confirmée par un paradoxe selon lequel le quotidien fonctionne comme forme de l’éphémère plutôt que gage de stabilité. La question de la possibilité de transcender le quotidien vient clore cette étude.

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